



GOVERNMENT HOUSE.

"The English idea of the Dutch ideal."

THE CAPITAL'S HISTORY AS TOLD BY ITS BUILDINGS

BY GERARD MOERDYK

In the following article Mr. Gerard Moerdyk, the well-known architect, shows how the understanding eye can read the romantic story of Pretoria in the styles of its buildings, and how South Africa is working towards a characteristic style in architecture.

PRETORIA Philadelphia! What an ambitious name to give a straggling village. And then it was shortened off into Pretoria only. Critics declare that it was done because its population became disillusioned, but all good Pretorians believe that it was on account of the lengthiness that the tail end was clipped off. However this may be, let us hope that our city fathers will not lose sight of all the ideals that such a name calls for.

At present Pretoria is still suffering from an inferiority complex, the principal symptoms of which are a general slackness, no foresight, no initiative, and no originality. The after effects are becoming plainly visible in our town. Next to a fine residence, upon which the owner has spent as much as he can possibly afford, a jerry-built cottage is permitted—that poisonous mushroom of the architectural profession—and, plunk! goes the value of the big property to probably nearly half its original cost.

Now, imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but, unfortunately for the imitator, it always remains a thing without a soul, and the result of copy is very apparent in the ramshackle appearance of most of our South African towns.

"But how?" the layman may ask, "are we to get away from copy, since we have as yet no definite architectural style of our own?"

There is but one answer to that question, namely, that we must develop a style of our own upon the wide and interesting basis of history, climatic conditions, and particular needs. Slowly and unconsciously, one must assume, we have already been working in this direction.

The historical development is easy to trace and through it, as in a mirror, we incidentally see the modes and customs of previous generations. The "hartebeest-huisie," which looks for all the world like a house of cards, with its flat roofed addition at the back, and which we still see very

often on the veld, gave way, in the town at least, to the unpretentious, sturdy-looking type, of which there are still many examples all over the older portion of the town. Built close up to the side walk, with its wide covered stoep stretching the whole length in front, it looked its part, the hospitable dwelling-place of the steadfast burgher.



MR. GERARD MOERDYK.

The house of President Kruger in Church Street is a typical example of this period. Architecturally it does not reflect any definite phase, except that it marks the beginning of the age of importation of building materials in the Transvaal. The spirit of the building, however, is typical of the mode of living in the early days of the South African Republic. Around it hover memories of the President, approachable to everyone, enveloped in the blue haze of his always-lit pipe, sitting on the stoep, listening with equal attention to grievances, topical jokes, and political schemes. The only distinctive feature of the presidential residence is the two lions guarding the entrance, and they are but inferior copies of Canova's lions in St. Peter's.

This type of house had its drawbacks, most certainly, and in most cases its planning was not good, but it possessed a quiet dignity which the next style lacks.

Then, with startling suddenness, the Republic became famous. Gold was discovered. Changes were brought about which only sudden wealth can bring. There had been no preparation, there could be no gradual development, and nowhere is this more evident than in the architecture of the years that followed.

Prosperity brought a flamboyant style. Foundations were raised, dwelling houses were ornamented with towers and turrets, large windows and much wooden trellis work round the verandah, as it then became, which was usually gaily painted green and white. The houses certainly looked gay and prosperous, but the homeliness of the former type was missing.

Of greater importance, though, is the fact that the direction in which this style led was wrong. The corrugated iron roof became general, cheap imported materials were used, orientation was not taken into consideration, history was forgotten. The houses are representative of the time in which they were built, sudden wealth, great excitement; truly a passing phase.

The old Government Building and the Palace of Justice are typical examples of the public buildings of the time. There is a triumphant flourish about them, that would not have been amiss in gay Vienna itself. But the change had come about too suddenly, the whole style was imported, complete in every detail, without a thought of historical or climatic conditions. It had not been built up like the Old Cape Dutch style, for it had no guiding genius like Thiebault or Anton Anreith to cast it into a suitable mould. It was a phase, it came and went, without adding one useful feature to the architecture of the country.

Then came the war with its paralyzing effect on all building development. And after the war came many changes.

Since then all public buildings have been designed departmentally, and departmental architecture has ever been characterised by a sense of restriction and uniformity. Here, too, for the sake of economy the watchful eye of the quantity surveyor has put a check on all possible flights of imagination and has kept the buildings tied down to brick and mortar.

Houses and business premises fared badly for years after the Anglo-Boer War. With the British occupation came hordes of men, without inspiration, with no knowledge or affection for the country and its history. They brought with them only copy of the Victorian era. By-laws were framed and building regulations drawn up, without giving a thought to climatic conditions or particular needs. It is due to these by-laws and regulations that Church Street presents such a deplorable spectacle today, with its noble row of bedpost columns on either side.

Gradually working his way to the fore, however, there was one man with vision and a sense of the correctness of things, but he stayed too short a while to live, to feel, and to build as a true South African. He tried, and successfully to a great extent, to awaken our interest in old Cape Dutch architecture, and he left idealised examples of it in several of the larger towns. The most striking example of this is Government House.

For a number of years after the Peace of Vereeniging had been drawn up, the office of Governor-General was of great importance in the Transvaal. A suitable residence had to be erected. As a mark of respect to the Dutchman, the house was built in the old Cape Dutch style. But it is the brick and mortar only that is Cape Dutch. As one comes up the fine driveway one realises instinctively that the spirit is that of a country house somewhere in Great Britain. It is the Englishman's idea of the Dutch ideal. The hand may be the hand of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob.

In the Union Buildings, however, Sir Herbert Baker departed from the Cape Dutch style, except in some fine detail, and gave preference to an adap-

tation of English Italian Renaissance. As a conception it is undoubtedly fine, that the grouping is not altogether satisfactory from all aspects is due to the fact that the whole design has not yet been built; as a national building, though, it stands aloof. It forms no part of the ideals and aspirations of the country or the people. As in every good work, there are many features in the Union Buildings which have come to stay, which definitely add to the general development of South African architecture. Space permits mention of only one of the most important examples, namely the low pitched tile roof. It has firmly established itself, for it has proved itself to be practical as well as beautiful.

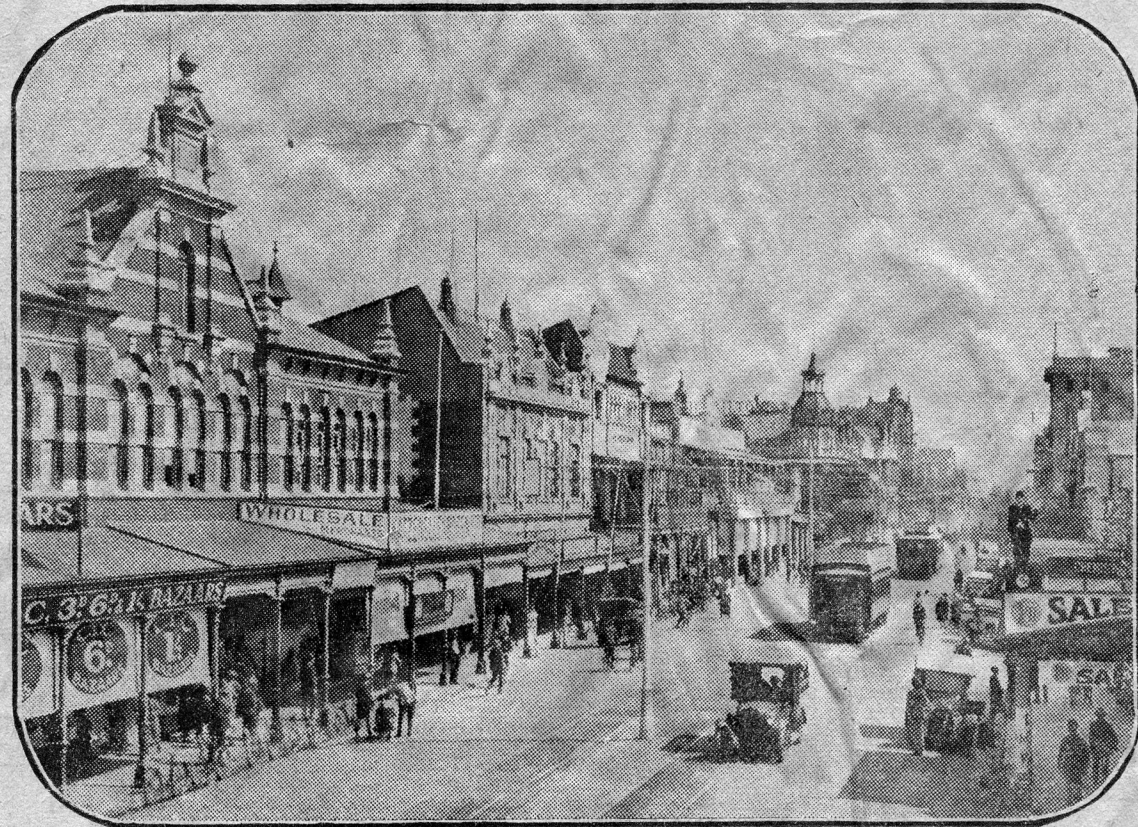
The ordinary imported tiles were found to be too frail to withstand the fury of our hail. A local tile was, therefore, made, and after lots of work and experiment a tile has been evolved which is strong enough to resist the bombardment of a Pretoria hailstorm.

Having surveyed the buildings of the past and considered the different phases through which our architecture has passed, there now remains the task of building up the principles of a style which will combine the good and traditional with the useful and necessary. The old Cape Dutch architecture without alterations does not, one instinctively feels, quite meet our special requirements in the Transvaal. There is something about those strong gables and the large roof which suggests resistance against a wet and somewhat sombre climate. The extremes of sunshine and storm in the northern part of the Union, seems to demand adaptation.

An architectural style, if it is to be national and lasting, must be founded upon the principle of selection. The useful must come before the ornamental. It has been found most difficult to get the flashing between the gable and the roof permanently watertight on account of our long dry season, the gables themselves become dusty and discoloured very soon, without attaining the mellowness which the wet winters of the Peninsula lend. Then, too, they are unsuitable for a double storied building, the proportions are spoilt. They were never intended for it. The two storied houses in the Cape have no gables. Properly constructed they are costly, more especially so if the space between the first floor ceiling and the inevitably high roof is not used at all. The shallow pitched tile roof wastes very little space and amply supplies the necessary protection against the sun, particularly to-day in the light of the non-conducting ceiling materials which are in general use.

The old plans are good, and a few slight alterations in keeping with the changes in our mode of living and modern conveniences, will make them most satisfactory. The stoep, too, is South African and has come to stay. Here in the Transvaal though the covered stoep is preferable to the pergola type of the Cape.

A kindly stranger called Pretoria "a villa town." With some forethought and consideration, we can truly make it so in every sense.



CHURCH STREET.

The result of ill-considered by-laws. Church Street, with its "jumble of bedpost columns."